

Seminar SAW
**Exploring 19th and 20th centuries historiographies of mathematics in
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What Do Historians of Philosophy Study? Some Methodological Problems in Defining a Corpus without Boundaries

Abstract – One of history's most remarkable cross-cultural encounters between representatives of different philosophical traditions, or at least one of the most remarkable such documented encounters, took place in India well before the British colonial period, at the height of the Mughal Empire, between representatives of the Sanskrit Indian, Persian Islamicate, and European traditions. In the mid-1660s the French natural philosopher, physician and disciple of the materialist Pierre Gassendi, François Bernier, was introduced by his Muslim host in India, Danismand Khan, to a pandit, who remains unnamed in Bernier's report but has been speculatively identified as Kavīndrācārya Sarasvatī, a Maharashtrian scholar and manuscript collector, and an important intermediary between Persian Islamicate learning and the Sanskrit tradition. Bernier is there to serve as a court physician to the Moghul rulers, but he has also passed his time, so he claims, translating Descartes and Gassendi into Persian, and loses no opportunity to communicate with his hosts on philosophical matters. He is well integrated into the Persian Islamicate world, even to the extent of being able to undertake significant translation projects in Persian, the language of the ruling elite throughout northern India under the Moghuls. The difference between him and his Muslim and Hindu hosts, I wish to show, may be traced back ultimately to differences in the mechanisms of knowledge transmission, on the one hand, and in the conception of the purposes of natural-scientific inquiry on the other. The orality and anthropocentrism that shaped the earliest period of Indian intellectual life, and that have played an important role in all Eurasian intellectual traditions, would serve as the distal causes of the appearance of utter difference between the thought worlds of the learned men of 17th-century India, and the French materialist philosopher and experimentalist who sought them out with a mixture of curiosity and contempt.